

Editor's View

Our doctors need urgent care

LONG hours and the demands of the profession can make it difficult for doctors to maintain a healthy work-life balance, which can negatively impact their mental and physical health as well as the standard of care rendered to patients.

Poor working conditions can have serious consequences for doctors, including increased risk of burn-out, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even suicidal tendencies.

Authoritative studies have shown that long shifts and heavy workloads can lead to fatigue, reduced sleep and increased risk of errors. Doctors are leaving in droves for greener pastures abroad.

The recent death of intern Dr Alulutho Mazwi at Prince Mshiyeni Memorial Hospital in uMlazi, Durban, has brought into sharp focus the working conditions in health care in South Africa, prompting urgent calls for reform and awareness.

The Public Servants Association (PSA) has alleged that Mazwi was forced to work by his medical manager, while being severely ill, and said this tragic death should serve as a wake-up call regarding the urgent need for change within the system.

The implicated medical manager had been placed on precautionary suspension, the KZN Department of Health said this week.

At the risk of being victimised, several doctors have stepped forward to share their harrowing experiences with the **POST**.

One doctor summed up the problem: "The humanity we are expected to extend to patients is denied to us."

Many doctors spoke of long working hours without sufficient breaks and inadequate support. They said addressing these issues through improvements in working conditions was crucial for the well-being of doctors and the quality of patient care.

Burn-out among doctors is a global concern. The prevalence of exhaustion and breakdown in doctors has been substantial in South Africa before the Covid-19 pandemic, and continues as an occupational challenge.

The healthcare system and its professional regulatory bodies have a responsibility in supporting the mental health and well-being of doctors by implementing preventative interventions that will contribute to the mitigation of burn-out.

Already South Africa is facing a crippling shortage of medical professionals, resulting in a strained healthcare system. Those doctors working within public health are being stretched beyond limit. The World Health Organization recommends one doctor for every 1 000 people.

South Africa's doctor-to-patient ratio is at critical shortage levels, with one doctor looking after 3 000 patients. The situation is worse in rural areas.

Meanwhile hundreds of doctors – especially from the public sector – are leaving South Africa for better working conditions in Canada, UK, US, Ireland, Denmark, Australia and New Zealand. The working conditions of doctors require critical care because it impacts patient care.